The story of Herbert and Darlene Charles’ love for collecting art starts not in travel to the far away places where they bought paintings from local artisans or the trip Herbert took to a famous artist’s studio, but in an act of love itself.

By the time Herbert and Darlene met at the University of California at Berkeley, they had both flirted with art—he in a Western Civilization class at Morehouse; she on trips with a friend to museums. After they were married and living in New York, Herbert was ready to begin collecting. He suggested prints as a start, but she wanted the real thing. They were ready to make a commitment.

Now, more than 30 years later, the Charleses have started on an even bigger project: the Morehouse Visual Art Initiative, a campaign to raise money to build a $7-million museum of contemporary art of the African Diaspora as a component of the $20-million Morehouse Center for the Arts, which includes offices for faculty and staff, classrooms and the Ray Charles Center for the Performing Arts (see page 50).

The initiative evolved from the observations made by the Charleses upon the couple’s Atlanta arrival in 1996. The long-time art patrons left behind the frigid winters of upstate New York to join the faculty at Morehouse. Darlene is an associate professor of psychology and Herbert is director of the Center of Excellence in Telecommunications. After Darlene noticed the dearth of art in their new workplace, particularly “contemporary African and African American paintings and sculptures,” she and Herbert began to explore how they could help Morehouse enhance its educational offerings with visual art.

They tested the waters, starting with the decision to sponsor an art exhibition at the 2000 National Black Arts Festival. This show would be a barometer of the kind of interest Morehouse could expect to generate in Atlanta’s burgeoning art community. The well-attended show assured the two that they could make change happen. With that in mind, the husband and wife team began to create the Visual Art Initiative, which unfolded, in part, from the rave reviews and subsequent feedback from the art show. Herbert became the initiative’s director and Darlene its assistant director. While developing the plan, their central focus was the examination of what was being done to foster student interest in visual art.

“Art tells a story of a person’s culture and experiences and it’s important to understand your experiences in..."
relation to your culture,” says Herbert. Adds Darlene, “Art [chronicles] the history of any culture. If you look back at art, it gives you a representation of culture at that point in time. Importantly, the focus on contemporary art allows for us to document and understand the artists work through their views as opposed to views of others.”

The Charleses will donate most of their collection—worth more than a million dollars, according to the couple—to the museum. For observers who call this effort a challenging task, the Charleses point to the museum they created in their home.

After 25 years of gathering evocative sculptures, paintings, etchings and wood carvings from the world over, the Charleses designed and built a museum on the terrace level of their Atlanta home. The impressive eight-room gallery uses 3,000 square feet of space to showcase each piece to perfection. Two rooms are devoted to 10 original works they own by the late William Tolliver, a black artist who used themes of jazz and labor in his work, and who inspired the couple to begin collecting artwork after Herbert toured his studio in 1986. Placed throughout the rooms are sculptures by Ed Dwight, an astronaut candidate-turned-artist who works in bronze and other metals to make large-scale memorials and smaller renderings of people and ideas in African American culture. The couple’s passion for South African art is reflected in what they have named the South African gallery, an enormous room filled with nine sculptures and paintings. Its 16-foot ceiling easily accommodates the largest sculpture, a massive metal-wood work, “The Saxophone Player,” by South African sculptor Willie Bester.

Works in the other rooms of the gallery include those by Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Samella Lewis, Kara Walker, Beauford Delaney, Margaret Burroughs and Thornton Dial, among others. Additionally, the works of William Anderson and Louis Delsarte, two Morehouse professors who also are renowned artists, are prominently displayed in the Charleses’s living space, as well as the private museum.

“We felt it was most important that a collection of this size and focus be given to an institution,” says Darlene of their decision to give most of the artwork they’ve collected to the museum. “Our years of collecting had led us on a parallel path with the College’s growth and expansion, culminating in the plans to establish the Center for the Arts.”

Herbert’s background in telecommunications and the passion the couple share for art as a learning tool, compelled the pair to design a technology component to the Morehouse museum so that visitors can better experience and understand art. Visitors will be able to download images of the museum’s art to their handheld PDAs. The PDA will respond with audio replies to visitor’s questions. Visitors will be able to keep the downloaded art and the associated database in their PDAs to download/share it with others. They will be able to access the downloaded information anywhere at anytime—from around the globe. The museum will also feature a high-tech gallery that has the capability to produce virtual images of art at the touch of a button.

“People are looking at art, but aren’t getting any information, any feedback, about the art,” says Herbert. “We’re trying to make each piece a personal encounter where you can interact with the art. The way we can do that is by developing technology that will enhance the person’s experience.”

Darlene says the museum itself is envisioned to become a “destination point [for] people from all over the world.”

“[Morehouse] is responding to one of the real reasons for a college or university and that is to be a repository of and for the culture, in our case, the cultures of the African Diaspora,” says Willis B. Sheftall ’64, senior vice president for Academic Affairs, who anticipates the fundraising effort for the museum to take two or three years.

The campaign is a labor of love for the Charleses, who expect the Visual Art Initiative to bring much deserved recognition to contemporary artists of the African Diaspora, many of whom have only received very limited recognition in the art world.